

OLD PEOPLE'S HOME, AFRICAN VALUE SYSTEM AND THE IMPERATIVE OF A CRITICAL SYNERGY

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Abstract

The human society generally recognizes the care of the aged as a moral obligation and a social responsibility. The Old People's Home, as a feature of the contemporary human society, is a social institution established primarily to fill this need. This discourse is basically an assessment of this feature of the contemporary human society in the light of African value system that is essentially founded on communalism. While the paper acknowledges that this arrangement has a number of identifiable merits, it observes that the Old People's Home system of caring for the aged hardly squares with the African socio-cultural orientation and the core values of African communalism. The paper contends that the network of social relationship in the African belief system embraces the deities, the unborn, the young, the old, and the even the dead. The social exclusion, which the Old People's Home occasions, therefore, amounts to a severance of the relationship ties between the aged, their families, and their society at large. Hence, the paper recommends possible routes to achieving a synergy between the two value systems.

Keywords: Old People's home, Care home, Retirement home, Nursing home, African communalism, African value system.

1. Introduction

Gregariousness is a quintessential constituent and ontological component of the human person. Indeed, man's ultimate survival in a world that is not altogether friendly is largely a function of mutual cooperation with his fellow men and his immediate environment. The Greek philosopher, Aristotle had rightly observed that "man is a social animal." Against the backdrop of the imperative of social intercourse and mutual collaboration among people with a view to need fulfillment, he averred that "he who is unable to live in the society must be either a beast or god."

Human life is certainly more meaningful, more rewarding and possibly elongated if well-cared for. Unarguably, at some point in a person's life the greater percentage of the care for his or her life becomes the responsibility of others. This is often necessitated by a number of factors including sickness and old age. How does the contemporary human society approach this vital social responsibility? What are the possible preferences of the individuals concerned? To what extent is the modern practice of confining the aged to a

secluded environment enhance this project or express love and concern? To what extent does this practice accord with African value system?

This discourse is basically a critical review of the modern approach to care-giving for the elderly, especially as typified in such formal institution as the Old People's Home, from the standpoint of African worldview, socio-cultural practices and value system. In addition to its basic presuppositions that caring for the aged and the elderly is a critical social responsibility the discourse highlights the implications of the possible approaches to this responsibility, particularly the Western and African styles. Anchoring on the insights of some randomly selected and interviewed elderly persons from diverse African societies, this write-up underscores the fact that the Old People's Home arrangement, though with considerable merits, hardly squares with African value system that is largely founded on communalistic principles.

Research Question

This paper basically aims at answering the question: To what extent does the Old People's Home, as a care-giving institution for the aged, satisfy this need for the Africans whose value system is fundamentally communalistic?

Research Statement

Taking care of the aged or the elderly is a profound social responsibility. The Old People's Home, as a care-giving institution, hardly accords with the African value system that is largely propelled by communalistic principles. Granted that the Old People's Home and similar care-giving institutions have considerable merits, the traditional African, given his psycho-social orientation, has proclivity for an old age spent with his kith and kin.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

This study proceeds from a theoretical/conceptual framework founded on African communalistic world outlook. Using a descriptive research survey design, it finds firm footing on the analysis of the findings of oral interview with some elderly persons in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. Leveraging on the analysis of the findings of this survey, this paper makes some rational recommendations on how best to integrate the positive features of African value system into the identifiable merits of the modern care homes for the optimal benefit of the aged.

Against the backdrop that human beings are naturally and ontologically wired to seek comfort, the desire to have a happy old age is considered an existential human need. Yet, the phenomenon of aging with its attendant challenges like bodily weakness, ill-health, etc. naturally necessitates the assistance of others in the satisfaction of its demands. While the care for the aged is acknowledged by virtually every human society as a vital social imperative, the approach sometimes differs consequent upon varying socio-cultural orientations. While for some it is a mere civic responsibility, for others it is a moral obligation as well as a socio-cultural and religious imperative.

Children have the social responsibility and moral obligation to respect their parents and care-givers as a sign of gratitude and a way of reciprocating the love and nurture received

from them. Arguing from his Christian religious background, St. Thomas Aquinas (1485: II –II, q 102. A.1) insists that children's obligation to love and revere their parents is premised on the fact that, after God, they are “the second source of life, growth and education”. In other words, they are cooperators with God in the work of fostering human life. In accordance with the scriptures he avers that this moral obligation is accompanied by a promise of divine favours: “Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you.” (Ex 20:12; Deut 5:16). Corroborating this idea, Peschke (2004, 601-603) writes:

The inner spirit of reverence must manifest itself in external signs of honour. Children sin against the honour due to parents if they are ashamed of them and disown them because of their humble state or poverty; or if they use offensive speech, treat them contemptuously, or raise their hand against them. . . . Love and gratitude must express themselves in words and signs. Children should show interest in family concerns and be ready for active help. Grown-up sons and daughters will assist their old parents if they are indigent and gladden them by their visits, phone calls and similar tokens.

In African culture, caring for one's relatives is a social endeavor with far-reaching merits; it is a family responsibility with the promise of being rewarded through the younger generation as well as a spiritual obligation associated with divine favours. It is believed that some consequences follow actions posited in favour or against the members of one's family. In fact, family ties entail responsibility of reciprocal care-giving. Beyond being social, the family relationship is sacrosanct, spiritual, has metaphysical and ontological implications. Hence, caring for the aged members of the family transcends mere social or moral responsibility; it goes beyond ordinary act of kindness with ephemeral benefits.

2. Old People's Home: A Profound Care-giving Institution

The general understanding of the Old People's Home as a place where elderly people live together and can be cared for when they are too weak or ill to take care of themselves succinctly captures its conception in present discourse. Whether it is private, public or government-owned establishment, it is basically a residence housing facility for the welfare of the elderly. For the purposes of this discourse, the concept of Old People's Home embraces the elements of all care-giving institutions or assisted living facilities for the elderly including nursing homes (hospice), rest home, retirement home, care home, and convalescence hospital. As a profound welfare institution for the elderly who have become practically incapable of taking care of themselves, Old People's Home unarguably has a number of merits. An ideal and functional care home ordinarily provides the services of the professional care-givers including doctors, nurses, nutritionists. To the extent that such institution enhances the physical and mental health conditions, and general welfare of the aged or the elderly, the system fills a very critical social need and possibly contributes to fostering life expectancy among these senior citizens. However, like any other human institution or establishment, the Old People's Home has its peculiar challenges including the tendency of the care-givers to render their services perfunctorily, insufficient or total lack of the resources needed for effective

management and efficient service delivery.

A people's worldview largely shapes their response and approaches to fundamental existential issues. While the fundamental objectives may be the same, attitudes to life and preferred solutions to existential problems among people may differ. Indeed, a people's perception of reality and their worldview largely determine their approach to life and play very decisive roles in the choices they make. Hence, the approach to care-giving for the aged often varies according to the values attached to social relationships by individual cultures. The elderly or the aged with individualistic psycho-social orientation would probably fancy spending their old age in an Old People's Home but those with a communalistic socio-cultural orientation would most likely prefer an old age spent in the company of close relatives.

It is an unfortunate, yet undeniable fact that a considerable number of contemporary human societies with their characteristic secularism largely trivialize virtue and relegate core human and moral values to the background. In socio-cultural climes where virtue is hardly honoured and sometimes even sacrificed on the altar of cleverness or smartness, there is the tendency to evade the noble and spiritually-rewarding virtuous responsibility of caring for the aged. This negative tendency is often advanced under the pretext of civilization or modernity, a feature of which the Old People's Home is. Surely, a system, in which people completely abandon their parents or elderly relatives in the hands of strangers, leaves much to be desired irrespective of how efficient such institution might be.

3. African Communalism, Cosmological and Ontological Concerns, Cognitive System and Epistemological Orientation

African Communalism: An Overview

The African value system, especially as modeled on African socio-cultural experiences of the visible world order, the planetary bodies, ecology, and their social and political institutions, is unique. The traditional African society is essentially founded on egalitarian and communalistic principles. The African conceptual scheme, customs, traditions, the cognitive or epistemological system, belief system, value system, philosophy, ideology and worldview at large are basically concerned with the promotion of equal rights and opportunities, mutual benefits and the common good of the members of the community, whether young or old. Surely, any human society consciously built on and run with such principles would naturally appeal to its members as it assures them of warmth and care in their old age.

Ordinarily, African values are deeply enshrined in traditional myths, fables, folklores, wise sayings, proverbs, stories, and religion. These constitute the channels through which African worldviews and ideologies are expressed, preserved and transmitted. A

number of contemporary African philosophers and African nationalists have embarked on critical examination of these with a view to advancing the frontiers of human knowledge and values. In fact, some principles of African communalism are encapsulated in the philosophical thoughts of those who advocate for a reversion to authentic African values, which they believe have been dealt a mortal blow by colonialism and its imports. For instance, the philosophical thoughts of Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Sedar Senghor and Julius Nyerere are replete with ideas bordering on communalism and its implications for the welfare of individual Africans and socio-political progress of the African society.

Nkrumah's advocacy for socialism finds eloquent expression in his doctrine of philosophical consciencism, which is simply a guiding principle for the cause of reverting to egalitarian and communalist principles of the traditional African society. According to Nkrumah (1964, 78), philosophical consciencism is a philosophical standpoint which, taking its start from the present content of the African conscience, indicates the way in which progress is forged out of the conflict in that conscience." Leopold Senghor's (1975) philosophy of negritude features a framework of critique basically aimed at re-discovery, cultural re-awakening, emancipation, and value-re-orientation for the Africans. As a response to the French colonial policy of assimilation, it aims at promoting the positive elements of African communalism and distinctive African cultural identity and worldview. Similarly, Nyerere's (1970) "Ujamaa philosophy" highlights the merits of communalism. The Swahili concept "Ujamaa", as employed by Nyerere in Tanzania, basically emphasizes "familyhood" or "family relationship" as a formidable foundation for social and economic development in the traditional African society. It is a socialist system of village cooperatives based on equality of opportunity. The "Ujamaa" philosophy recommends a society constituted of atomic family units (ujamaa villages) founded on socio-economic policies aimed at promoting mutual collaboration and eliminating inequality and exploitation. Nyerere (1975) maintains that, in the modern world, the idea of familyhood could be extended beyond the extended family and the tribe to embrace the whole of African societies and so could constitute a basis for African socialism.

The communal nature of African culture also finds very vivid expression in the Ubuntu Philosophy of the Bantu People of South Africa. "Ubuntu" is an African philosophy that places emphasis on "being self through others" or "humanity towards others". It is a form of humanism which can be expressed in the phrases "I am because we are" and "I am because you are" (in Zulu language: *ubuntungumuntungabantu*). Simply put, it is "the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity" (see The Guardian, 2006). It is associated with such principles as communality, respect, dignity, value, acceptance, sharing, co-responsibility, humanness, social justice, fairness, personhood, morality, group solidarity, compassion, joy, love, fulfillment, and conciliation (see Tutu 2013).

A fundamental idea expressed by the Ubuntu philosophy is that in African thought, the

human person finds true definition, identity and relevance only when considered in the context of the group to which he belongs. A person is considered a constituent of a particular community and the community defines who he is and who he can become; he experiences life through his family, the lineage, the clan and the tribe. Metuh (1987, 193) articulates this idea thus:

From birth an African learns to believe that 'I am, because I belong'. An individual is a 'nobody'. The family makes the man. The family is made up of not only the living but also of the dead members and those yet to be born. There is an ontological element in man linking him to his family, and through the family to the clan. This is not only the physical and biological element, but a spiritual element.

Communalist thoughts and orientation find expression in a number of Igbo socio-cultural philosophies. Such expressions as “*Ohabuike*,” “*Igwebuike*,” “*Ohabuenyi*,” and “*Ibuanyidanda*” underscore the fact that unity is strength; they demonstrate and embody communalistic principles and relegate individualism to the background. The communalistic worldview of Africans emphasizes human feelings and sentiments over abstraction and individualism that often characterize the Western culture. It also recognizes and acknowledges the influence of the spiritual realm on the physical. In fact, African ontology, cosmology and general value system maintain that there is a thin dividing line between the physical and metaphysical worlds. The living and the dead have common grounds of interaction. Libation and divination are concrete channels of this mutual interaction and communion. Of course, the ancestors, and even some gods, are believed to be elders who lived decent lives, peacefully transited to the world beyond and who have received decent burial. The ancestors are often reborn into the same family to ensure continuity; when their assistance is sought; they are also capable of punishing people for wrongdoing, healing the sick and answering prayers.

A critical aspect of African belief system that demonstrates the interlocking relationship between the two realms of existence and the responsibility of the living towards the dead is the phenomenon of re-incarnation. In his *Religion in Africa*, Parrinder (1969, 84) observes that “reincarnation is the return of the dead or some part of their life force to their family.” He strongly argues that the idea of reincarnation among the Igbo flows from their philosophy of power and force. Hence, what is passed from elders to children is “force, which makes life possible and through which property is inherited. Notably, the ancestors are reborn into the same family to ensure continuity. Francis Arinze (1971, 17) expresses a similar view as he observes that the Igbo family firmly believes in life after death. At death, the spirit of a person continues to wander about until it rejoins the ancestors. It is only a befitting funeral that stops the wandering of a deceased spirit and helps him reunite with the ancestors. According to Arinze, “until a befitting funeral rite is done, the spirit will continue to harass the relatives for such critical abandonment.” It is only when the spirit has joined the ancestors can it return to earth for another earthly existence. He further observes that the Igbos believe in reincarnation (*IloUwa*), that is “the returning to the world of their ancestor after death into the same family home.” Notably, what

reincarnates is not the whole man but a part of the ancestor's spirit. The child comes under particular influences of an ancestor by receiving part of his spiritual vitality and qualities. According to Arinze (1971), reincarnation (*IloUwa*), as part of the Igbo belief system wields influence on the ethical and moral behaviours of the Igbos of Nigeria; it inspires them to do well in order to reap the fruits of their good deeds when they must have died. For them, therefore, the phenomenon of reincarnation is a blessing for it gives one the opportunity to retrieve missed qualities in a previous life; it is natural, god-implemented tendency and longing to live on and to return to life after death.

Cosmological and Ontological Concerns

In African conceptual scheme, as already observed, there is a thin dividing line between the two possible worlds or realms of existence – the material and the spiritual, the visible and the invisible, the temporal and non-temporal. Notably, there is an ontological hierarchy in the order of beings, and a network of relationship among the different levels of being. IkengaMetuh's description of the hierarchy and interaction of beings from the perspective of African worldview succinctly captures the specifics of African cosmology and ontology. On this stress, he writes:

An example of this close relationship between the material and spiritual realm is seen in the belief that the deities inhabit the natural phenomena with which they are associated like rivers, forests, sky, or the sun. The ancestors among many African groups are believed to be around their homes and hearths, and take part in all important family affairs. There is a continuous exchange and interaction between beings in the universe irrespective of the realm (visible or invisible to which they belong. Men could be possessed by spirits, and spirits sometimes incarnate themselves in visible objects. Men can influence the deities and the spirits through sacrifices, prayers and spells. Conversely, the deities can intervene in human affairs to bring good fortunes to their devotees, and misfortunes if their laws are flouted (Metuh 1987, 62-63).

In spite of the subtle variations in structural models and conceptions of the cosmic order, a considerable number of African societies acknowledge that there is an interlocking relationship between the spiritual and the physical worlds. Both form a unified system and integrated cosmic order. African cultures have common underlying features including the imperative of social cohesiveness and consciousness as well as an admittance of intricate ties between the physical and metaphysical or spiritual worlds. According to Metuh (1987), the Africans generally believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, God, who is the sole origin and cause of everything that exists and who sustains all things in being. The Supreme Being (*Chi ukwu/Chukwu* for the Igbos, *Olodumare* for the Yorubas, *Onyame* or *Onyakupuon* for the Ashanti of Ghana) manifests itself through the deities and divinities (*Abosam* for Ashanti and *Mmuo* for the Igbos) as well as the spirit forces (*Arusifor* for the Igbos) and such ancillary spiritual paraphernalia as Medicine, Charms and Amulets (*Ogwu* for the Igbos). The heavenly bodies are sometimes named after the deities inhabiting them; hence, one can talk of the sky-deity, the sun-deity, the earth-deity (*Ala*, the Mother Earth or earth goddess), the water-deity, the fertility-deity,

etc.

With regard to their specific domains and operational modes, Metuh (1987) observes that the spirit forces which spring from the deities could inhabit trees, rivers, animals, and sometimes men who function as their agents and representatives. “The ancestors and spirit-forces which have their abode on earth are under the “Earth-mother.” In fact, ancestors under the presidency of the Earth-mother are said to be founders and guardians of traditional laws and customs as well as morality. According to Metuh (1981), the ancestors (*NdiIchie*) also transmute to spiritual realms and assume spiritual forces that could be invoked when their assistance or spiritual company is needed or desired. The Spirit-forces are in their hundreds and find their abode in mysterious rocks, caves, mountains, trees and rivers. There are also a host of evil spirits mainly wandering ghosts of men who have not reached the spirit-land of the ancestors. Witches and sorcerers are men who possess spiritual powers but use them for anti-social activities.” “Different deities and spirit forces are believed to meet different human needs. The Sun-deity, for example, brings fortune especially wealth, the Thunder-deity is regarded as the agent of God against undetected criminals. Each deity is believed to be agent of God in his assigned sphere of influence” (Metuh 1987, 69).

One finds an ideal model of the interaction of beings in Placide Tempels' concept of “being” in Bantu Philosophy. For Tempels (1969, 60), no being is an island and nothing moves in the universe of forces without influencing others by its movement. The African concept of beings, according to him, is best rendered by the term “force vital” (Vital force), because being is dynamic and is thought to be alive and active. Being is all the time acting and being acted upon by all other beings. According to Tempels (1969, 46), in the process of this ontological relationship with one another being is capable of being strengthened or weakened. Corroborating the views of Tempels, Metuh (1987) concludes that “the goal of interaction of beings, in African world-views, is the maintenance of the integration and balance of the beings in the universe. Harmonious interaction of beings leads to the mutual strengthening of the beings involved and enhances the growth of life. A pernicious influence from one being weakens other beings and threatens the harmony and integration of the whole. On this, he writes:

The main objective of an African is to live a life in harmony with humanity and with nature. Man strives to be in harmony with God, the deities, and his fellow men both living and dead. He feels himself in intimate rapport and tries to maintain harmonious relationship with the animal, vegetable, and other elements and phenomena in the universe. For him, the first evil is disintegration, for this would spell disaster both for himself and his world. The ideal thing is integration, communion and harmony. Man must constantly consult oracles and divination to assure himself that he is in right relationship with all the forces in his world. He must frequently engage in rituals to reinforce his communion with the forces or repair any interruptions that may have occurred.” “A man's well-being consists rather, in keeping in harmony with the cosmic totality.” (Metuh 1987, 78-79).

The notion of the Living-dead or ancestor in African culture and value system is of

critical importance to the basic pretensions of this discourse. This is especially given that man, in the African culture, finds relevance in the context of his society, which comprises the living and the dead; both are tied by very strong bonds of relationship. The Living-dead or Ancestors, according to Mbiti (1967), are spirits of all the deceased who are still remembered and venerated by members of their family. Ancestors are those who have achieved the highest spiritual status recognized by African religion, through death after ripe old age, good conduct and have left offsprings. They are also men who have experienced “good death”, that is, death after ripe old age. Good death here is contrasted with unnatural or bad death, which is considered a punishment from God for one's sins the victims of which cannot receive full funeral rites and so cannot become ancestors. The latter include deaths by suicide, accident, leprosy, dropsy, small pox, epilepsy, etc. The departed who have no offsprings, whether old or young, generally do not become ancestors. Rather, they are regarded as disgruntled spirits because they have nobody to venerate them. They are therefore believed to be malignant and liable to cause misfortune. Against the backdrop that there is a close relationship between the sacred and secular, the material and the spiritual, Parrinder (1962, 27) maintains that “those who have crossed that further shore are with us still, in dreams, in offerings, in rites performed and oracles consulted. Indeed, they are nearer than before and as being invisible one cannot tell when they are around.” For the Greek philosopher, Euhemerus of Macedonia (320-260), the gods were departed chiefs and warriors, who had been venerated before their death and deified afterwards; they came from human ancestors, and the myths concerning them embody memories of historical events (see <http://www.britannica.com/topic/Euphemerism>). Substantiating this view with historical examples, Smith (1964, 32) avers that Shango, the Yoruba god of lightning, thunder and storm, is a deified hero and believed to have been the fourth king of Oyo, the ancient Yoruba capital. Likewise, the Yoruba deity, Oduduwa, is said to be the first king of Ife. Danquah, (1968), also holds that the Supreme God of the Akan is a deified ancestor. God, according to him, is the primordial ancestor of the tribe; “as such ancestor, he deserves to be worshipped, and is worshipped in the visible head, the good chief of the community.”

The ancestors are believed to be closer to the Supreme Being and the deities, and act as intermediaries between these divine beings and members of their families. It is believed that success and prosperity in this life depend on favours from the ancestors who are always in communion with the living members of the community. At meals, the old Ashanti of Ghana and the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria usually offer the first morsel of food to the ancestors and pour libation to them daily. They are believed to be constantly watching over their living relatives. But they punish those who break traditional laws and customs or fail to fulfill kinship obligations with illness and even death. Their blessings for those who obey customs consist in plentiful crops, children and prosperity. Every lineage is protected by its own ancestors, but it is the dead rulers who protect the tribe. With their better knowledge of the affairs of the spirit world, they constantly warn their descendants and kinsmen of an impending disaster and counsel them on what to do to attract the most

favourable fortunes. As members of the clan into which they hope one day to reincarnate, they are very concerned with the continued existence and strengthening of the clan. They are therefore believed to be custodians of traditional laws and customs on which the survival of the clan depends, and would punish with sickness or misfortune anybody who flouted them. Mbiti (1969) describes the role of the ancestors thus:

They return to their human families from time to time and share meals with them, however, symbolically. They know and have interest in what is going on in their family... They are guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities. Offence in these matters is ultimately an offence against the forefathers who, in that capacity act as invisible police of the families and communities.

Remarkably, there are some variations in the realms of influence wielded by the ancestors. According to Smith (1950:84), the family ancestor look after the affairs of their family, the ancestors of the clan oversee the affairs of the clan. Ancestors who were chiefs look after the whole tribe. Smith further observes that among many South African Bantu peoples (eg. The Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Tswana, Thonga, Shona, etc) ancestral cult is at the center of traditional religious practice. According to him, Bantu culture demands that people emulate the ancestors as they determine the standard of morality. For him, the good and moral man in Bantu society is the one who honours the ancestors by living as they lived (Smith 1950, 86).

The foregoing review of the role of ancestors basically aims at underscoring the fact that in the African conceptual scheme, man is a member of a human community that is made up visible and invisible members, who wield mutually enriching influence on one another. He belongs to a socio-cultural world that features a dynamic admixture and interplay of physical and spiritual forces. From the standpoint of African ontology, which borders on man's origin and final destiny, man is understood as being in relationship with his creator; his origin is in God and he has a definite role in God's plan. Man is also conceived as one of the life-forces and interacts with other living forces in the universe. Thus, whether deliberate or inadvertent, any act of estrangement or social exclusion of the elderly Africans from a socio-cultural community to which they are sentimentally and spiritually attached would likely undermine their well-being.

The Imports of African Cognitive System and Epistemological Orientation

The African epistemological system associates wisdom with old age. Older people are considered more advanced in knowledge and wisdom given their accumulated wealth of experience. This cognitive system is unarguably in line with the communalistic framework of other elements and features of African culture. From the standpoint of African cognitive system, reality is perceived as an integrated whole, incorporating social, political, economic, and religious realities. Given that knowledge and wisdom are functions of accumulated practical experience, they are largely embodied in the aged and the elderly. The experiences of the aged are always considered treasures of great value, which must neither be trivialized nor allowed to be lost. Their thoughts embody great

lessons as well as cultural and traditional values; hence, a popular saying goes, “the words of our fathers are words of wisdom.” A single conversation across the table with a wise man is said to worth a month's study of books.

The doctrines and tenets of African culture and tradition are largely unwritten; they are mainly transmitted orally from one generation to another. African values find expression in traditional arts, fables, proverbs, idioms, rituals, music, dance, folklores and myths. These constitute the channels for transmitting African socio-cultural values as they embody the vestiges of the past, the foundations of the present and the embryos of the future social relations in any given African society. The elderly people of one generation owe it as a sacred duty to the community to transmit their wealth of knowledge and socio-cultural values to the next generation. Of course, this sacred duty is best carried out in the family setting, not in any solitary confinement or strange environment that the Old People's Home represents. The natural home provides a fertile environment for the mutual exchange of socio-cultural values; while the younger generation take care of the aged, the aged enrich them with their invaluable wealth of knowledge and wisdom.

4. Old People's Home: Implications from the Perspective of African Value System

While there are variations in its mode of organization, the family is considered the primordial human institution. Sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and indeed virtually all scholars and researchers on human social relations acknowledge the critical impact of the family on the human person, his personal development and the socialization process. The family experience inspires affection, promotes bonding, and expresses the imperative of mutual care and concern. The effects of the family experience naturally extend from the biological family to the wider human family, the society. While this is a general human experience, it is more pronounced in the African value system.

From the perspective of African socio-cultural system, the Old People's Home could facilitate a tactical shift or even complete evasion of responsibility towards the aged. It may also betray a sense of ingratitude given that one is obliged to reciprocate the care, love, and affection received from the aged when they become old and helpless. Worse still, living outside the warmth and affection of the home may amount to subtle ostracism or quarantine, which is only the lot of those found guilty of committing abominable acts. On the strength of John Paul II's thoughts in *Familiaris Consortio*, Peschke (2004, 603) captures the possible limitations of this modern trend thus:

In many advanced or developed countries there is a tendency to entrust the elderly often too readily to homes and institutions for the old. The consequence is a regrettable loss of the relations between young and old. “The elderly often have the charism to bridge generation gaps before they are made: how many children have found understanding and love in the eyes and words and caresses of the aging! And how many old people have willingly subscribed to the inspired word that the crown of the aged is their children's children' (Proverb 17:6).”

The Old people's home, like such modern practices as voluntary single parenthood, undermines the essentials of the foundations of the family institution. It inadvertently occasions the severance of family ties and transmission of family values from one generation to another, and above all denies the aged of the warmth of their children and the pleasure of natural sense of fulfillment associated with seeing and being with their offspring. Living with the members of one's family or relatives, especially children and grandchildren prolongs the life of the aged as it fosters some psychological satisfaction and a special sense of fulfillment. This is typical of the African socio-cultural climate. On the other hand, one could experience depression as an immediate consequence of the social exclusion, isolation, and loneliness, at the slightest feeling of being abandoned by one's family. Experience and available evidence show that the family members of the aged are often better disposed to take care of them; they are better disposed to tolerate their excesses and sometimes awkward and weird behaviours associated with senility or old age.

In essence, nurtured in a socio-cultural environment and value-system that emphasize an interdependence of beings – physical and metaphysical – the African assumes a psychosocial disposition that considers successful intersubjectivity and interpersonal relationships as determinants of social relevance, meaningful life and authentic personal identity. The individual finds meaning and relevance as a member of a community. “I am, because we are.” Little wonder, the African value system prioritizes cultures that express collectivistic features and tendencies over individualistic ones. Hence, the Old People's Home or similar care-giving institutions, from the perspective of African communalism, not only alienates the individual human person from his natural environment, but especially destabilizes the natural balance of the cosmic order and the natural course of interaction among beings.

5. The Research Survey

The sample for this research survey includes one hundred and fifteen (115) elderly persons randomly selected from a number of Igbo cultural communities in Eastern Nigeria. These elderly persons were orally interviewed on their preferences with respect to care-giving, that is, whether to spend their old age in a familiar environment or in a formal care-giving institution. These resource persons include:

- (a) 20 persons from 4 different communities in Nenwe town (Uhueze, Emudo, Amoji and Agbada) in Aninri Local Government Area in Enugu State.
- (b) 16 persons from 4 different communities in Ohodo town (Umuezeaguiyi, Umuezikenwoke, Owerre, and Ajuona) in Igbo-Etiti Local Government Area in Enugu State.
- (c) 10 persons from 2 different communities in Ukehe town (Ezi-Ukehe, Amadim) in Igbo-Etiti Local Government Area in Enugu State.
- (d) 15 persons from 2 different communities in Ede-Oballa (Amaegbu, Ugbele) in Nsukka Local Government Area in Enugu State.
- (e) 15 persons from 3 different communities in Enugu-Ezike (Imufu, Umuadogwa and

Umuida) in Igbo-Eze North Local Government Area in Enugu State.

(f) 12 persons from 1 community (Umuokwara) in Isu Local Government Area in Imo State.

(g) 12 persons from 1 community (Mgbidi) in Oru West Local Government in Imo State.

(h) 15 persons from 1 community (Nnobi) in Idemili South Local Government in Anambra State.

The Research Findings and Recommendations: Towards an integrated Care-giving System

Ninety seven (97) out of the total number of the persons (115) interviewed preferred to spend their old age in a familiar environment, with the members of their family, relatives and friends. 18 persons expressed views that did not directly favour the family arrangement. 7 persons among the later 18 welcomed the idea of staying in an Old People's Home but with a caveat, that is, that they would require regular visits by the members of their family. 11 persons among the 18 were rather neutral or indifferent. Remarkably, among the latter 11 were either childless people or people who have lost most of their close relatives.

This survey indicates that among the Africans, particularly the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria, there is a greater penchant for an old age spent within the family setting and among relatives. The idea of care home is only an alternative arrangement resorted to when the natural, ordinary or preferred course of action is difficult or practically impossible.

The family, whether nuclear or extended, plays vital roles in the life of the individual human person and the society at large; it is the most fundamental agent of socialization and the channel of transmission for socio-cultural values from one generation to another. While there is a wide range of possibilities open to an individual, family values, the location of the family, the social status and identity of one's family directly or indirectly shape the individual's world outlook and largely determine one's opportunities in life. This character of the family is more pronounced in African societies given that they are mainly communalistic in nature.

On the strength of the findings on which this discourse is based, it is strongly recommended that, where it is possible, the care for the aged, for the most part, takes place within the family environment. However, where the family arrangement is not possible, regular visits of the family members, friends and well-wishers must be maintained. This would hopefully enhance their psychological well-being. Certainly, even the assistance of professional care givers is considerably more fruitful when rendered in the family setting or the natural home. Going through the old age experiences within the family setting is therefore more advantageous. Just as the regular visit of the sick enhances their health conditions, frequent visits of the close relatives and friends of the aged in their natural homes or the Old People's Home, when the latter applies, improve their well-being.

6. Conclusion

The advocacy expressed for the Old People's Home and the reservations expressed about it in this discourse basically aim at reviewing its relevance as a care-giving institution, especially from a socio-cultural perspective. Surely, the family is not the only source of legitimate and most fulfilling life; nevertheless, the family setting, especially in the psyche of the traditional African, provides more reliable and preferable sense of security than unfamiliar situations and environments. Based on the insights garnered from this survey, without underestimating the merits of functional care-giving institutions, this discourse advocates for care-giving for the elderly within their natural homes and environments.

The traditional African finds meaning and fulfillment in life as a member of a definite human community. This community comprises the unborn, the living and the dead. In fact, the traditional African who lives a good life remains part of his community even after death as an ancestor. Separating him from this socio-cultural environment at old age is a disservice to him. In the light of African socio-cultural orientation and value system, a proper integration of the aged or the elderly into the matrix of socio-cultural relationship fosters a healthier and happier old age. For most Africans, care within the family setting is associated with considerable positive indicators; it is considered more favorable, promotes happiness, inspires a feeling of fulfillment, provides greater measure of psychological satisfaction and ultimately enhances the life of the aged or the elderly. Estrangement from the natural family environment, on the other hand, often leads to depression and fosters a sense of loneliness and sometimes diminishes life-expectancy among the aged Africans.

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